

# Detroit teacher tried to find, save girl found in freezer

By Rochelle Riley, Detroit Free Press 1:27 p.m. EDT April 4, 2015

*As hard as it is to consider, there may be other children in danger. And current policies regarding homeschooling and child abuse may not protect them.*



(Photo: Eric Fredlund)

Eric Fredlund was going for his twice-daily walk last week when a Detroit teacher called with the horror. A former student and her brother had been found stuffed in a freezer, allegedly killed by their mother.

"I was in shock," Fredlund said, "and I guess some of my first thoughts were, 'What more could I have

But when Stoni Ann Blair suddenly stopped coming to school, he did try to help.

Fredlund, who retired from Detroit Public Schools last September, reported Stoni's absence to a DPS attendance agent. That agent said he requested a bench warrant for the mother. Fredlund never learned because of the warrant.

Weeks later, Stoni was still out of school and a frantic Fredlund called Child Protective Services, who told him something he says he has never forgotten: "In the state of Michigan, (a lack of school) attendance is neglect."

Then Stoni was gone.

For more than 100 days, she didn't come back to school. That stretched to years.

Last week, she was found dead in a freezer with her brother, Stephen Gage Berry.

The deaths of Stoni and Stephen have raised questions about everything from mental illness to what constitutes neglect of children. It also raises questions about Michigan standards for homeschooling.

Did Michelle Blair convince school officials and neighbors that she was indeed schooling her children at her home? Or did homeschooling, which can be effective when done right, become an alibi for murder?

The heinous nature of these crimes has rocked a region that has been buffeted by tragedies too numerous to mention. But none seems worse than a mother collecting state benefits for two children while pretending to teach them as they lay dead in a freezer — a freezer that her two other children had to pass by each day.



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Records: Mom forced daughter to put dead sister in freezer

[\(http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2015/03/26/freezer-mom-frozen-bodies-mitchelle-blair/70499754/\)](http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2015/03/26/freezer-mom-frozen-bodies-mitchelle-blair/70499754/)



**Mitchelle Blair, accused of killing two of her kids and keeping their bodies in a freezer for years, is shown during an earlier court appearance.** (Photo: Eric Seals, Free Press)

Blair has been charged with first-degree murder after she reportedly confessed to the killings. Her attorney has entered a not-guilty plea in the case. A visibly upset judge set her bond at \$1 million.



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Attorney: Mom in freezer deaths 'loves her children'

[\(http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2015/04/02/freezer-mom-children-death/70820164/\)](http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2015/04/02/freezer-mom-children-death/70820164/)

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Fredlund was very upset that Child Protective Services could do nothing about a child missing from class. But that is the policy, and the person the teacher spoke to followed the rules.

"If we don't have any knowledge of abuse, there is nothing we can do," said Maura Campbell, spokeswoman for the Department of Human Services. She could not discuss any previous complaints filed against Blair. But she, like others across the state, has been saddened by the murders.



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Mom of children found in freezer charged with murder

[\(http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2015/04/01/mother-freezer-murder/70786226/\)](http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2015/04/01/mother-freezer-murder/70786226/)

"We can't keep cases open indefinitely," she said speaking generally about protective policy. "But there is a judgment call to be made."

Campbell said she hopes this tragedy will prompt others to pay attention to the children around them and get involved to help a child. The state hotline to report suspected abuse cases: 855-444-3911.

"I really do want people to call our hotline," she said. The irony is that this tragic case opens National Child Abuse Prevention Month. "Here we are to get more people paying attention, not to ignore signs. I'm worried that that gets lost. Communities must protect their children, and we all have to figure out how to do it better."



**Stoni Blair, 13, was found in a freezer at her mother's house in Detroit. (Photo: Family photo)**

Maybe one of those things is for schools and for the state to investigate further when children disappear. It might have made a difference in Stoni's case.

Karen Clingman was the assistant principal at Duffield when Stoni Ann attended. She recently spoke with Stoni's second-grade teacher and the conversation was a heartbreaking reminder of promise lost.

Clingman said the teacher had worked closely with Stoni because she had a lot of absences in second grade, but "when she came back, she was on just like that."

Stoni "was a very bright child."

She also said that Stoni was a child living with a volatile mother. When the school returned late from a field trip, Clingman said, Michelle Blair called Stoni's teacher and threatened her.



**Stephen Berry, 9, was found in a freezer at his mother's house in Detroit. (Photo: Family photo)**

Clingman left the school before Stoni did, but she said that homeschool rules offer no guarantee that officials know where a child is.

That frustrated Fredlund, who said it is easy for children — sometimes going from the Education Achievement Authority school district to charter schools to DPS — to get lost in the system. He said that, some years ago, he wouldn't get a child's records for the school year until May.

Keeping up with children also isn't helped by Michigan's lax homeschool policies, which require very little oversight. Parents are not required to register with the state. Parents are not required to tell school districts that they are pulling their children from the district. And school districts are not required to report homeschool cases to the state.

And you do not have to have even a bachelor's degree or teaching certificate to homeschool your child, or to object to that training based on religious beliefs.

While Eric Fredlund was searching for Stoni, records show she was enduring a life in hell.

In court records and testimony from her oldest child, Michelle Blair is accused of torturing Stephen until he died on Aug. 30, 2012. Blair, according to court records, then wrapped him in bed linens and put him in the deep freezer.

The following spring, Stoni told her mother she didn't like her remaining siblings, according to the records.

On May 25, 2013, Michelle Blair "became enraged and strangled Stoni with a black T-shirt and suffocated her with a plastic bag," according to testimony. She allegedly then made one of other children put Stoni into the deep freezer.

Fredlund was heartbroken.

"Stoni was a beautiful, kind and smart girl who fell far behind her classmates because of being absent," he said. "She was probably the nicest kid in the whole class. I never ever felt that she wasn't safe. She was very happy. ... She'd just be doing what she was supposed to and smiling."

Among the treasures and keepsakes of Fredlund's 32-year career is a photo of Stoni and two of her siblings. They are smiling, their eyes hopeful.

"I guess my goal is to help make sure this doesn't happen again," Fredlund said of why he is talking about his search. "I don't know what more I have done."

Thank God for Eric Fredlund. It won't be blight and taxes that steal the most joy from Detroit. It will be the loss of our children.

I lost some joy and many tears this week because of the deaths of Stoni and her brother. But I gained some hope from a teacher who refused to let her absence.

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